

THE CASE FOR CULTIVATING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE | ADAPTING TO CHALLENGES, SUSTAINING HOPE

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"IN EVERY COMMUNITY THERE IS WORK TO BE DONE. IN EVERY NATION, THERE ARE WOUNDS TO HEAL. IN EVERY HEART THERE IS THE POWER TO DO IT."

– Marianne Williamson

Communities today are shaped and impacted by a myriad of complex issues – the effects of climate change, deteriorating infrastructure, an aging population, growing debt levels at the household, government and corporate levels, rising inequality, and growing rates of loneliness and isolation in people of all ages.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY RESILIENCE?

The concept of community resilience is a multi-faceted one. Most often, community resilience is defined as a community's ability to "bounce back" after a crisis or disaster. This definition, however, is

incomplete. A second important, but often overlooked, dimension of community resilience recognizes the proactive efforts required to build stronger and more cohesive communities. In a report published by the Building Resilient Neighbourhoods Project of BC's Capital Region, this proactive form of community resilience is highlighted by several examples. The report also emphasizes that choosing to adopt a "lens of resilience" requires "a focus on community building, addressing inequities that exist for vulnerable or marginalized groups, and strengthening social ties" in ways that increase "a community's capacity to respond proactively and enhance well-being even while under stress." (The Resilient Neighbourhoods Project, 2013, p. 5)

In Creating Resilient Communities: A How-to Resource Guide for Cultivating Resiliency in Local Communities. the concept of community resilience is recognized as an ability, a process AND an outcome. When community resilience is present, residents demonstrate the ability to unite community resources (social, cultural, political, physical, economic, material), and collaborate to take collective action. Community resilience stems from and grows through community members working together to develop and build resources and, when necessary, to mobilize those resources in response to change, allowing the community to direct and affect the outcome." (St. Luke's Health Initiatives, 2015, p. 7)

Community resilience offers a useful "lens" or way of looking at community issues. The lens of resilience is rooted in a perspective that views communities as complex and dynamic living systems that should be viewed holistically. After a shock or set-back, resilient communities demonstrate the ability to "adapt and embrace

deep change” and respond creatively to the new challenges confronting it.

Communities that embrace the concept of resilience discover that creative solutions emerge from the willingness to move beyond commonly proposed, sector-specific solutions in favour of new solutions that are generated by appreciating the interconnections between community issues. In fact, the holistic view encouraged by the lens of resilience appreciates that, “long-term solutions to a (acute or chronic) city issue may not exist in isolating and fixing just that issue; rather the ‘answer’ might lie in better understanding systemic relationships within the city and working to strengthen ostensibly disparate issues at the same time.” (Sustainable Cities Institute, 2013).

The number and complexity of issues facing communities, municipalities, and nations today makes a compelling case for the need and value of cultivating communities’ capacity for resilience. When a community is resilient, “the resources, relationships and networks that have been build over time can be put to work to promote the well-being of community members and the community as a whole...and how a community responds to those changes may be the difference between adapting and flourishing or floundering and fading.” (St. Luke's Health Initiatives, 2015)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF A RESILIENT COMMUNITY

Each community and neighbourhood is unique, and so, there is no single fixed recipe for achieving community resilience. Fortunately, there are some useful frameworks and characteristics that provide some signposts. Research reveals specific characteristics commonly found in resilient neighbourhoods and communities. The Canadian

Centre for Community Renewal identifies characteristics of community and neighbourhood resilience under four dimensions (Canadian Centre for Community Renewal, 2000, pp. 15-16):

1. **Positive attitudes and values.** The social relationships that exist within a community not only contribute to its resilience, they also help define its distinct culture. The attitudes, behaviours, and culture of a community are reflected in: the relationships that exist between people; levels of trust that residents have with one another; residents’ sense of belonging; and respect for diversity and inclusion. When people within a community or neighbourhood speak about “the way things are done around here” they are describing its culture. In *A Basic Guide to Community Organizing*, John McKnight offers the following tangible examples of a resilient community that has found “its way”:
 - Everything is personal. The neighbours know me by name.
 - I am valued. It is recognized that I have gifts to offer the community.
 - There are opportunities for my gifts to be given.
 - There is informality to Our Way. Order exists, but it is not rigid and allows for my uniqueness.
 - There is creativity and spontaneity. There are opportunities for singing, celebration and eating together.
 - Invention abounds.
 - There is tragedy, and it is acknowledged that tragedy is a part of life. So we mourn and move on together, always finding Our Way.” (McKnight J., *A Basic Guide to ABCD Community Organizing*, 2013, p. 20)
2. **Proactive and ongoing leadership development and planning.** Resilient neighbourhoods and communities proactively engage residents to build consensus around a shared vision. Leadership is shared across a diversity of citizens and groups within the community and collaborative action is embraced as a means of accomplishing projects to realize the shared community vision. At the core, this

characteristic of resilience is demonstrated in a willingness to learn and experiment with innovative approaches to making positive change happen.

3. **A localized economy.** This dimension of community and neighbourhood resilience highlights the importance of promoting locally-owned businesses over externally-owned ones. It also involves engaging residents in the need and value of “shopping local” to support community-based enterprise; encourage local employment opportunities; and, ensure that the local economy is diversified. Tool-shares and barter between neighbours are encouraged and valued within this dimension of resilience as well.
4. **Infrastructure and resources.** This dimension of community resilience considers the physical infrastructure and resources that the community has access to. It also encompasses considerations about community design. Access to shared green space and community gathering spaces such as parks, community gardens etc. can play an important role in fostering social connections between residents, and providing places and spaces for community celebration. Another key element of this dimension is an emphasis on ensuring local access to food, shelter, and renewable energy for all residents.

Ultimately, community resilience is cultivated by focusing on assets and emphasizing "... the existence, development and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise." (St. Luke's Health Initiatives, 2015, p. 10)

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

Place plays a significant role in the creation and shaping of community resilience. Embracing a “place-based” rather than “issue-based” approach encourages work to unfold within the boundaries of a particular geography and results in resilience being built at a very local level. This aligns well with

the growing recognition that promising solutions and strategies to many global issues can be found at the local level. A neighbourhood focus emphasizes people’s connection to place, and provides a manageable scale where people can often see first-hand the impacts of their actions. In this way, the neighbourhood scale often engages and excites people by demonstrating that change at this level is “far-reaching, yet feasible.” (The Resilient Neighbourhoods Project, 2013, p. 9)

TEN ACTIONS THAT BUILD RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

The report, *Resilience: Health in a New Key*, published by the St. Luke’s Health Initiative makes a powerful case for the cultivation of community resilience and acknowledges it as central to addressing the social determinants that impact the health of individuals and communities. This report shares 10 rules which its authors have discerned as central to building resilient communities. (St. Luke's Health Initiative - Vitalyst Health Foundation, 2003, p. 24) These are:

1. **Be Prepared for Long-term Commitment.** Building resilient communities takes more time than three or five-year initiatives. Be prepared for a long-term commitment.
2. **Nurture Natural Caring Relationships.** Resilience grows through the support and extension of natural caring relationships. Notice and nurture these wherever possible.
3. **Build from the Bottom Up.** Resilience starts with strengthening the natural helping institutions in neighbourhoods and other geographic settings. Build from the bottom up.
4. **Be an Ally, Not an Expert.** Be a coach and an ally, not an expert.
5. **Invest in Organizing.** Social change requires confrontation as well as collaboration. Don’t be afraid to invest in organizing.
6. **Invest in Advocacy.** Power responds to pressure. Be an advocate and invest in advocacy.

7. **Focus on Strengths and Assets.** You can't motivate others by focusing on what they lack. Start with an emphasis on strengths and assets.
8. **Support Peer Learning.** Build social support by nurturing peer-to-peer learning networks.
9. **Surrender the Need to Control.** Don't be a control junkie. Community resilience arises from self-organization, active learning, surprise and adaptation. Self-control arises from mastery. Develop that first.
10. **Nurture Shared Leadership.** Disappear into leadership. Encourage the light in others. The world will roll at your feet.

Community engagement and participation are essential to building resilience. A shared, aspirational vision as well as a comprehensive and holistic view of the community's assets are both important elements needed to create realistic and achievable plans for shared action. However, once these plans have been developed, there is no end to the creative ideas and strategies available to make community and neighbourhood resilience a reality.

DISTINCT & CHANGING ROLES IN BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

The pathway to community resilience involves not only a willingness to do different things, but also a willingness to do things differently: challenging each other to think – and view – situations in new ways. The authors of *Strengthening Neighbourhood Resilience: Opportunities for Communities & Local Government* note that for local organizations and governments, this may require a re-examination of how they think about their relationships with communities. Embracing the concept of community resilience is, “not meant to justify a new round of social programs, even if they have more of an outreach focus. Rather, community resilience involves a philosophical shift in relations between the state and civil society that changes the parameters of how local communities organize and act.” (The Resilient Neighbourhoods Project, 2013, p. 6)

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Both citizens and service delivery organizations have important roles to play in fostering community resilience, but their roles are distinct. Often, the work of community members and that of community-based organizations are viewed as one and the same when, in fact, they are actually quite different. Whereas communities tend to be informal and horizontal in their structure, non-profit organizations tend to be formal and hierarchical. Whereas communities rely upon the experience and knowledge of residents that is freely shared, non-profits rely on the specialized knowledge of paid professionals and experts. When speaking of communities, it is also important to recognize that a community is much more than a group of individuals who happen to live in close proximity to one another. Strong communities are those where the skills and talents of residents are known, recognized and connected.

This distinction between communities and organizations becomes particularly important as organizations, municipalities and communities discover the power of collaboration and its ability to generate promising new solutions to our most complex issues. Not only are these multi-sector solutions often more effective, they also result in stronger communities and more resilient neighbourhoods. The ability to work differently together begins by appreciating the distinctiveness of each sector, and co-creating a new way of working that is honouring of each sector's strengths and differences. When this is done right, innovative new solutions are co-created which generate powerful, and often long-lasting results.

HOW DEEPENING COMMUNITY CULTIVATES COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

For communities to be resilient and thrive, they need to be built on a foundation of care and deep connection. For communities to address complex issues, they need to bring together many sectors and tap into the power of citizen leadership. Yet a growing number of citizens of all ages are experiencing isolation and a lack of belonging. How can we bridge this chasm? How can we deepen community for Canadians at a time when it is so urgently needed?

Tamarack's Deepening Community Practice Area is leading an effort to discover and innovate new ways to foster a "conscious, proactive, intentional effort to hold on to and build on the connections between us, connections that will help us resist the pull of the often neurotic social responses to the complexity of our times ..." (Born, 2014, p. 5) Our aspiration is to see the power of neighbourhoods and communities recognized and to help community members feel connected, engaged, and empowered.

The Deepening Community Practice Area has cultivated three distinct, yet complimentary methodologies for strengthening neighbourhoods and engaging citizen leadership.

1. Supporting Cities to Host Local Deepening Community Initiatives

Local Deepening Community Initiatives are a collaboration between Tamarack and community leaders to implement action learning projects that are both highly aspirational and profoundly practical. Specifically, these local projects involve: hosting community conversations; creating an inventory of citizen skills and desired learnings; building consensus on a community-wide vision, and identifying tangible projects that community members can work on together to realize that vision. The opportunity to work together on specific projects identified by these Initiatives also foster a strengthening of relationships of care between neighbours. As noted by renowned social innovator and Order of Canada recipient, Vickie Cammack,

"care is an alchemist in our communities, unleashing a force deep within us. It enables us to build up our social immune system."

To date, Tamarack has partnered with six communities to implement Local Deepening Community Initiatives. This has enabled us to refine and practice adapting this methodology to a diversity of community contexts. Our continued relationships with these local projects over time has also enabled us to begin to observe the longer term impact, value and sustainability of this work.

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS AND COLLABORATION IN PETERBOROUGH, ONTARIO

The Peterborough Partners for Wellness is a diverse group of community leaders from a variety of sectors. The goals they set for their Local Deepening Community Initiative include: connecting people, neighbourhoods and institutions; reducing isolation; establishing meaningful connections between ongoing projects; and, talking about power. A unique aspect of Peterborough's approach to this Initiative was the Leadership Group's desire to use the project to build citizen leadership. A total of thirty citizen volunteers were subsequently recruited – and trained – to host, facilitate and document community conversations. The data from these conversations is now being synthesized and will be shared back to the community through community celebrations that are planned for later this Fall. Ultimately, the hope and expectation is that consensus on a long-term community vision will be shared; opportunities for greater collaboration will be identified; and, tangible community projects will be identified and put into action.

CREATING BETTER OUTCOMES FOR BABIES IN BALTIMORE

The Baltimore neighbourhood of Upton-Druid Heights is improving health outcomes for their youngest residents, those under 1 year of age. In 2010, following the news that the City of Baltimore's infant mortality rate was the 4th worst in the United States, a collaborative effort known as B'More for Healthy Babies was launched. Led by the

Office of the Mayor, with co-leadership from The Family League of Baltimore and the Baltimore City Health Department, the goal of B'More for Healthy Babies is that "all of Baltimore's babies are born at a healthy weight, full term, and ready to thrive in healthy families. The project collaborates with 150 community partners and residents to raise awareness and ensure that all are informed about the issues contributing to infant mortality.

In six years, B'More for Healthy Babies has generated some impressive results, including:

- A 24% decrease in infant mortality
- A 32% decrease in teen pregnancy
- A 10% decrease in low birthweight
- A decrease in the number of sleep-related deaths – which has been the biggest contributor to lower infant mortality in Baltimore

B'more for Healthy Babies has partnered with Tamarack to implement a Local Deepening Community Initiative to strengthen community engagement in their work. They believe community engagement is needed to sustain their positive progress and strengthen their collaboration with neighbourhood residents in ways that further embed the skills and knowledge of their project within these neighbourhoods.

2. Convening a National Neighbourhood Strategy Leaders' Network

Tamarack's Deepening Community Practice area is mobilizing a network of leaders from municipalities and organizations across Canada whose role is to lead the development and implementation of a comprehensive neighbourhood strategy in their community. This peer network has grown rapidly. Within one year, we have attracted 21 members from across Canada. Together, we are discovering and documenting innovative approaches to neighbourhood-building that are successfully engaging residents and unleashing their creativity, talents, and aspirations in ways that are resulting in concrete and measurable improvements in the quality of neighbourhood life.

The resources and tools generated from the Network are continually being added to our online library as a way of disseminating this knowledge in order to accelerate the practice of neighbourhood-building across Canada.

The Neighbourhood Strategy Leaders' Community of Practice meets by phone every other month. On each call, one Network member profiles and share insights from their neighbourhood-based work and invites feedback, advice and input. In June 2016, Jerry Firth, who leads **Beyond Your Front Door**, the City of Lethbridge's neighbourhood strategy, profiled his city's work.

BEYOND YOUR FRONT DOOR – LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA

Lethbridge's **Beyond Your Front Door** Neighbourhood Initiative began in 2014 as a demonstration project. Its purpose includes: strengthening resident engagement within neighbourhoods; promoting more connected, healthy, and safe neighbourhoods; supporting the development of neighbourhood groups; increasing opportunities for social inclusion; and, to encourage greater collaboration with local government in deciding and implementing important community projects.

The Project has faced challenges including: finding grassroots neighbourhood leadership; supporting multiple neighbourhoods with a single staff position; fitting a community development models into the bureaucratic model of local government; and, finding adequate resources to sustain the work.

The project has also generated a number of significant successes. These include: growing community interest in neighbourhood identity; sense of community in neighbourhoods and neighbourhood development; development of Neighbourhood Associations; increased city support (from council, management and cross-departments); inclusive and accessible neighbourhood spaces, programs and events; and, partnerships and collaborations with community groups and businesses.

Like all neighbourhood strategies profiled in our the Neighbourhood Strategy Leaders' Community of Practice, the highlights and resources of Lethbridge's **Beyond Your Front Door** Neighbourhood Strategy have been summarized into a Case Study which will be uploaded into the library of Deepening Community (www.deepeningcommunity.ca) Online Learning Community.

3. Growing and Supporting a Dynamic Learning Community

Our Deepening Community Learning Community virtually connects people who are interested in developing a deeper understanding of the power of citizens and making this a guiding force in how neighbourhoods, organizations and institutions address complex issues together. We are striving to make it THE go-to website for the latest resources on effective approaches for cultivating citizen leadership and neighbourhood capacity-building.

Tamarack's Deepening Community Learning Community is now home to more than 1,800 members who: subscribe to our monthly e-newsletter; participate in our free webinars with prominent thought-leaders; and/or, have joined one of our two Communities of Practice. In the past year, we have hosted three regional Deepening Community workshops and, in June we hosted 159 learners at our annual three-day Learning Event. Our Deepening Community: Resilient Neighbourhoods When People Care Gathering offered participants an opportunity to celebrate a neighbourhood hero; join a locally-sponsored neighbourhood street party; and, learn from our keynotes, faculty and each other. All the resources and workshop material from this event – including participants' 10 favourite tools for neighbourhood and community change – were then made fully accessible online for all.

The three primary strategies of the Deepening Community Practice Area demonstrate how the work of harnessing citizen leadership and building strong communities can be accelerated when community leaders learn together. We believe that strengthening connection and

resilience in our neighbourhoods and communities as an essential aspect of the future of our country.

The work of our members is demonstrating how tangible community responses that can overcome the growing rates of isolation and loneliness being reported by individuals of all ages in communities across Canada. While many different articles and organizations have drawn attention to the growing evidence and impact of isolation and loneliness, Tamarack's Deepening Community Practice Area is one of the few places where active experimentation is underway to test, confirm and refine promising practices to address this issue.

EMBRACING THE OPPORTUNITY OF DEEPER, MORE RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

Efforts that intentionally deepen people's experience of community are demonstrating promise in addressing an array of complex issues. Citizens, organizations, and municipalities have the capacity to collaborate across sectors to tackle tough issues like crime, unemployment, isolation and loneliness and local economic development when they have built relationships of trust that enable them to work effectively together. These multi-sector approaches, which are rooted in meaningful engagement, are also demonstrating a positive impact on individuals, neighbourhoods, organizations, and municipalities.

THE IMPACT FOR INDIVIDUALS

2014 Stats Can data (Enright, 2014) reported that:

- 1 in 5 older Canadians describe themselves as "lonely or dissatisfied with life"; and,
- 64% of Canadian post-secondary students reported feeling very lonely within the last 12 months

This is particularly worrisome in the face of recent data that show loneliness is harmful to our health. The negative health impacts of loneliness have been found to be as detrimental as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Social isolation increases an older person's likelihood of premature death by 14 percent, making it twice as deadly as obesity, and it also

increases the risk of dementia.

As people’s sense of community deepens and their collective resilience is strengthened, individuals will experience better health and more connectedness. People’s health and happiness are strengthened when they are connected to others. Community life offers opportunities to care for and about others as well as to be cared for ourselves. This builds a sense of belonging and is a source of support in both good and bad times.

THE IMPACT FOR NEIGHBOURHOODS

Research shows people who feel a sense of community are more likely to take action for the common good. A 2015 Angus Reid Survey on Belonging (Community Foundations of Canada, 2015, p. 7) found that while 32% of Canadians report a very strong sense of belonging to their community, fully 38% say they “don’t feel they have a stake in their local community.”

By strengthening the social fabric of our neighbourhoods and ensuring that neighbours come to know each other, neighbours will have an improved ability to take action, problem-solve and seize new opportunities.

Acts of caring will thrive in our communities because the skills, opportunities and benefits of caring – between friends, neighbours and even strangers – are recognized and supported. A growing number of neighbourhoods and communities are now recognizing that meaningful community engagement is foundational to growing their collective capacity to work together across sectors. Working in this way ensures that the whole is far greater than the sum of its parts. The benefits of this work to communities is powerful. The benefits of this approach to individuals, while not always as obvious, is equally profound: it transforms the place where they live to a place they know and can call home.

ABOUT SYLVIA CHEUY



Sylvia is passionate about community engagement and the unique role that citizens play in creating dynamic and well-connected neighbourhoods and communities. She delights in delivering learning opportunities that profile, disseminate and share the resources, tools and experiences to Tamarack’s vast network of learners primarily via the Tamarack Deepening Community Learning Community.

ABOUT TAMARACK INSTITUTE

Tamarack is a connected force for change. We believe that when we are effective in strengthening community capacity to engage citizens, lead collaboratively, deepen community, and innovate in place, our collective impact work contributes to building peace and a more equitable society. Learn more at www.tamarackcommunity.ca.

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